

BACKGROUND

NAPLAN was introduced in 2008 with results publicly available on My School since 2010. NAPLAN is a Commonwealth Government program of student assessment fully supported by state and territory government education ministers. NAPLAN was initially established for the purpose of identifying students not meeting minimum standards in literacy and numeracy and now is a condition included in funding agreements with the Commonwealth Government.

Today, according to ACARA, the overall purpose of NAPLAN is to:

- Identify areas of strength and need for individual students;
- Measure how the child is performing against a national average;
- Measure how a local school is performing against schools in similar areas or socio-economic circumstances; and,
- Better target resource allocation.

At the July 2013 Education Council meeting, ministers agreed to NAPLAN Online. It was provisionally targeted to commence in 2016, pending careful examination of transition issues. As it turns out, NAPLAN Online is only being trialled this year and schools can commence in 2017, depending on their technological readiness to participate.

DISCUSSION

There is little to indicate that NAPLAN has had any significant positive impact on school performance or improvement in student achievement (ACARA Media Release, Aug 2015). It should also be questioned whether NAPLAN testing and the My School website truly sit with contemporary teaching and learning practices. Consequently, there are still questions (cost, impact on teaching, school morale, etc) as to why Australia, unlike other countries, continues to implement an ineffective program.

APPA contends that NAPLAN Online testing will have a major impact on primary schools. Significantly, as NAPLAN results are often seen as the indicator of school performance, the growing expectation may well be that students in Foundation to Year 3 use digital devices throughout the day. The real cost of resourcing this development is high and schools will need to find the funds from within current budgets, by redirecting money from other areas, asking parents to pay more, not offering essential or co-curricular programs and the like.

In 2017, schools will either be doing NAPLAN online or as a pencil-based test. In reality, as advised by ACARA, there will be two different tests; one an adaptive test on the computer and the other a straight question and answer pencil and paper test. APPA questions how two very different testing formats can be used to compare schools on the My School website or, as happens in a number of jurisdictions, in the media. It is also difficult at this point in time, with the available information, to be confident in the reliability of the Online Writing component.

At this stage, APPA is not convinced that computer-based marking of writing can pick up all nuances of a child's writing. The profession would need to be totally confident that this would not disadvantage any school or students and, at this stage, we do not have that assurance. We also believe it will lead to a decrease in creativity and imaginative writing. Instead, we will get formulae-based teaching and writing, where digital skills and text structure will be the focus, not true creative and imaginative writing.

The rollout of NAPLAN Online brings with it logistical and fairness issues. Firstly, well-resourced schools with good connectivity and onsite technical support will likely be well positioned to see that all students are tested in a reasonably equitable way. That cannot be said for other schools, when the hardware is of varying quality (lower processing speed), when the technical support is limited or where connectivity is poor. Secondly, running over three weeks, sharing limited hardware across classes, testing and recharging

computers, etc are all disruptive aspects of NAPLAN Online testing that should be considered. In a situation where schools are compared on My School, this inequity is of great concern and adds to the 'high stakes' nature of NAPLAN in general.

APPA would also see that a valid, contemporary 21st Century learning program would not use whole cohort or mass testing to measure achievement and growth. APPA would further argue that, if national data on student achievement is needed, then sample testing, as is done with PISA and other international assessments, will provide a more effective and robust understanding of Australia's education standards.

The following concerns are specific in relation to Year 3 Writing:

- Online Writing testing raises questions around what impact this will have on the teaching of writing, particularly in the earlier years.
- Online Writing testing needs to be fair, in that it needs to be a similar experience for all students, and comparable to pencil and paper testing.
- Online Writing testing would likely lead to increased teaching of touch typing and keyboard skills in the early years, thereby taking time and focus away from essential teaching and learning.
- Online Writing testing should not be introduced until clear evidence is available that benefits outweigh the consequences, and comprehensive consultation with the profession has been completed.

APPA's NAPLAN ONLINE POSITION

1. APPA advocates the value of sample testing in literacy and numeracy as a way of capturing national, system and school learning achievement data.
2. APPA calls for research into the value of NAPLAN and its impact in terms of student equity, curriculum delivery and pedagogical practice.
3. APPA strongly endorses the position that NAPLAN results for individual schools not be published on My School.
4. APPA does not support NAPLAN Online Writing assessment in Year 3.
5. APPA believes that ACARA needs to hold further consultation with primary principals on the following matters:
 - i. There are likely flaws in reporting and comparing student outcomes when two different testing processes are used.
 - ii. Students will be using a range of devices to complete the testing; there will be wide variability of Internet access; and, there will be limited availability of, and wide range in, quality of technical support across schools.
 - iii. Testing student writing online, particularly in Year 3, will see teachers employ a different set of pedagogical and assessment skills to that currently employed, an emphasis upon keyboard and touch typing skills over creative writing skills, and a reduction in opportunity for younger students to develop the essential fine-motor skills required for writing.
 - iv. Handwriting remains a significant component of literacy development and there is some research to suggest that handwriting encourages students to reflect more deeply upon their writing than when using a keyboard. This needs to be further explored.
 - v. There is a cost benefit to government in moving to NAPLAN Online; however, it is a benefit unlikely to be shared by schools. It may, in fact, place a greater financial burden upon schools because of the additional resourcing required to give students the keyboard skills in the early years and in meeting the increased number of devices required to manage the NAPLAN Online testing requirements.